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Teatro Olimpico by Andrea Palladio

an iconic stage scenario; and the diffused lightning system by Mariano Fortuny - enhancing the aura of mystery in the Wagnerian universe

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Teatro Olimpico by Andrea Palladio - an iconic stage scenario; and the diffused lightning system by Mariano Fortuny - enhancing the aura of mystery in the Wagnerian universe

Abstract

My paper deals with the origins of stage design experienced through architecture – pointing out that the term scenography includes all of the elements that contribute to establishing an atmosphere and mood for a theatrical presentation: lighting, sound, set and costume design.

Historically scenography has evolved from roots in the classical antiquity and notably connections to the architects of the Renaissance era - largely due to the theatrical activity in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century creating a historical interrelation between architecture and scenography. However, the separation of stage design from architecture is a modern notion deriving less specialization and cross-pollination of design disciplines.

My approach considers this relationship between scenography and architecture, firstly taking Andrea Palladio, one of the most famous architects of the sixteenth century, into a holistic exploration.

Palladio designed the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza and its infrequent permanent sets at the end of his illustrious career. It is still a unique example to learn from. Palladio said, “A room has to be for the eye, as music is for the ear”. I put up the question why the relationship between scenography and architecture by time became forged.

The annotation is interesting: scale drawings of a plan, section and elevations, and scale models; historically architecture has been expressed this way, but could the essential difference be that the stage is a fictional universe, a neutral space for imagined places. Yet the modern theatre owes much to its historical and traditional connections with architecture - and lighting and sound design have been tossed into the mix because technology has made it possible to control and reproduce them, along with set and costume design.

My paper takes the term *scenography* further into debate. Focusing on this historical interrelation between architecture and scenography; I introduce Mariano Fortuny (y Madrazo) who was the rarest of theatre designers: he created both scenic, costume, and unique lighting designs in his Lab that he established in 1912 in the Palazzo Pesaro degli Orfei in Venice. Fortuny worked untiringly in this marvelous laboratory; shutting himself away from the world, he dedicated himself to diverse and ambitious projects. His innovations in developing electrical lighting instruments and electrical installation protocol revolutionized how theatres attacked the technical limitations of this newly developed technology. One cannot help being aroused by his contemporary innovations in textile design, dyeing techniques, and clothing designs.

Fortuny was greatly influenced by Richard Wagner in his theatrical settings, who, in turn, had a very intense relationship with the city of Venice. Fortuny went on to do much work in the theater, specifically related to lighting and set design.

My paper deals through these two designers of historical iconic theatre scenarios with scenic design as a holistic exploration of Opera Set Designs.

Keywords: Iconic Theatres, Light design, Architecture, Andrea Palladio, Mariano Fortuny

Paper

“Fortuny was fascinated by the idea of lighting the Wagnerian oeuvre, especially the Ring cycle, in new and experimental ways. He felt strongly that the great thundering God Wotan would never appear as Wagner had conceived him if he was not properly lit.” (Deschodt, 2000, p.125).

“The real dream of the Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico is that of always referring to something other than itself, while remaining constantly itself, with or without performances, as “monument” and as “theatre”; as “fake” theatre since it in the last analysis and in its own small a sublime caricature of the great ancient theatre of marble.” (Rigon, 2004, p.70).

Two worlds, separated by centuries, both affecting and entangling the stage as a space for imagined places. Can the question whether the origins of stage design be experienced through architecture be answered by confronting two unique creators, two designers of iconic stage scenarios and techniques, separated by several centuries in time; Andrea Palladio and Mariano Fortuny? It is my thesis that the term scenography includes all of the elements that contribute to establishing an atmosphere and mood for a theatrical presentation, involving lighting, sound, set and costume design. Taking the term scenography further into debate by focusing on the historical interrelation between architecture and scenography, I introduce the two famous creators and their works.

Mariano Fortuny (y Madrazo) who lived in Venice was the rarest of theatre designers: he created both scenic, costume, and lighting designs.¹ His innovations in developing electrical lighting instruments and electrical installation protocol revolutionised how theatres tackled the technical limitations of this newly developed technology.

Fortuny was called “the little Leonardo” and the “Magician of Venice”, a felicitous name for the artist with multiple talents and paradoxical nature.² It is difficult not to be thrilled by his innovations in textile design, dyeing techniques, and clothing designs. Marcel Proust described that the gowns were like the theatrical designs of Sert, *Bakst* and Benois who at that moment were recreating in the Russian ballet the most cherished periods of art with the aid of works of art impregnated with their spirit and yet original. “These Fortuny gowns”, writes Proust, “faithfully antique but markedly original, brought before the eye like a stage setting, with an even greater suggestiveness than a setting, since the setting was left to the imagination, that Venice loaded with the gorgeous East from which they had been taken, of which they were, even more than a relic in the shrine of Saint Mark suggesting

¹ Mariano Fortuny was born in Granada in 1871. His father, Mariano Fortuny y Marsal, was a distinguished painter, and his mother, Cecilia de Madrazo, came from a family of artists, architects and critics (Byatt, 2016, p.6).

² www.annamariiefisker.dk

the sun and a group of turbaned heads, the fragmentary, mysterious and complementary colour.” (Proust, 2006, p.748).

Among these designs was the Delphos gown that was a finely pleated silk dress first created in 1907. It was inspired by, and named after, a classical Greek statue, the Charioteer of Delphi. Fortuny was amidst the very first designers to propose a loose, body-skimming silhouette free of corsets, and many women were delighted and much enchanted by wearing such a dress (Carrier, 2009, p. 100).

The Delphos gowns were imported to Paris by the couturier Paul Poiret, and the fashion house *Babani* that sold them to actresses such as Eleonora Duse. The gowns are still desirable and the collectable pieces are sold at world record prices.

Fortuny was greatly influenced by Richard Wagner in his theatrical settings, in Bayreuth, Fortuny's eyes were opened by Wagner to the possibilities and needs of the theatre. During the early 1890's, the costumes and scenery of the Tetralogy³ and of Wagner's other works were those that the composer had used during his lifetime. Fortuny was startled that the same scenery was being used in the Tetralogy as had been used for its first performance in the presence of Ludwig II of Bavaria in 1876. The contradiction between this naturalistic scenery and the spiritual or metaphysical music of Wagner was completely at odds with the spirit of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Around 1893, only a year after his first visit to Bayreuth, Fortuny began his first experiments with light and its effects.

³ A tetralogy – from Greek, ‘four’ and ‘discourse’ - is a compound work that is made up of four distinct works. The name comes from the Attic theater, in which a tetralogy was a group of three tragedies followed by a satyr play, all by one author, to be played in one sitting at the Dionysia as part of a competition. Wagner's tetralogy, the ring of the Nibelung is among the famous ones (Rehm, 1994, p.16).



Figure 1. Project for light application. Model for the Bayreuth Theatre 1903 experiments with painted mirrors to add light reflection. Mariano Fortuny at Palazzo Fortuny Venice. Photo: Mark Pimlott.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, light had been transformed through the harnessing of electricity. Suddenly the mystic light of the cathedrals, the sensual light of the Venetian palazzi and the mysterious light of the gas-lit streets became full of new possibilities (Osma, 1994, p.58).

By 1900 electricity was taking over, and several companies were offering to install the new power wherever it was wanted: in factories, hotels, workshops and even in private dwellings. Nor was its potential overlooked by the artists of the day, as Fortuny himself exclaimed some years later: “Do you know of any mystery more beautiful than electricity?” (Tumiati, 1931).

The English novelist A.S. Byatt accentuates that to think about Fortuny is to think about light. Light reflected from silk and velvet – and flesh – light on water and stone, airy light, dense light and almost infinitely coloured light (Byatt, 2016, p.56).

As mentioned by Byatt, Fortuny invented and refined a system of reflected electric light for the stage – a dome - white at first and then with mixed and reflected colours, whereas Wagner’s operas, in the days of gas lighting, had had endless painted backdrops (Byatt, 2016, p.63).

With this invention, Fortuny was now able both to compose the setting onstage, conducting light as one conducts music, and to do away with the empty spaces between elements of the painted sets. He began with a white dome but moved soon on to a collapsible light one (Osma, 1994, p.166).

For some time, however, Fortuny’s thoughts had been turning back to his old idea of a universal theatre that would revitalise dramatic art. He had already drawn up several plans for his friend Gabriele D’Annunzio, the Italian writer and poet, at the beginning of the century, and now started

working on a large maquette of the project. The scale model reproduced Fortuny's vision in detail. It revealed an enormous amphitheatre, capable of being adapted to every kind of spectacle, which bore traces of Greek and Roman influence and recalled elements of Palladio's Olympic Theatre in Vicenza (Osma, 1994, p167).

Alike the Olympic Theatre the back of the auditorium was bounded by a great *loggia* adorned with statues. An awning, like the *velarium* of ancient Roman theatres, retained sound and protected the spectators from bad weather, but was also designed to control the natural light, acting as an additional stage effect. The theatre included the Fortuny dome and indirect lighting system, 'thereby succeeding in transferring, in the field of lighting, that concept of an association between the stage (action) and the public, which in the Greek theatre was constituted by the orchestra (chorus)' (Osma, 1994, p.166).

The dome enclosed the whole stage, but an opening at the centre let in natural light overhead that could be made work with the artificial light in the theatre, to produce harmonies and contrasts both on the stage and in the auditorium. It was to be, in Fortuny's words, 'a theatre in the sky, where people feel really out of this world' (Osma, 1994, p.167).

On 28. September 1901, D'Annunzio departed for Vicenza, leaving Eleonora Duse with whom he both had an intensive collaboration as well as an affair, in Venice; Fortuny followed him the next day. They studied the Olympic Theatre and discussed the possibilities of adapting it for one of D'Annunzio's plays, but there were technical difficulties and the plan was never realized. The visit made a great impact on Fortuny, and he began seriously to consider the idea of creating a new type of theatrical building (Osma, 1994, p.74).

As the originality and modernity of Andrea Palladio's creative design did not escape either D'Annunzio nor Fortuny; so will it not escape the modern visitor argues Maria Elisa Avagnina, director of the Olympic Theatre in Vicenza (Avagnina, 2005, p.18).

An argument one must agree with, feeling a kind of conceptive energy entering the theatre that seems unleashed by the meeting of an abstract model and real physical requirements.

Soon after his visit to Vicenza, Fortuny returned to continue work on his dome, and by the beginning of 1902, he had produced his first large-scale model, which measured five meters in diameter. This early version already incorporated the two features that Fortuny considered essential; it could be folded so as to take up as little space as possible, and it was easily moveable (Osma, 1994, p.75).

During the 1920s Fortuny's contribution to the theatre gained widespread recognition. He had spent a great deal of time improving his dome, and it was now used in many theatres, notably in France, Germany and Russia. Italy, however, was the first to grasp its full potential, and his efforts were crowned by the installation of a large dome in the country's most famous opera house, La Scala of Milan. It was 22 metres in diameter and was composed of white, sized cotton of the kind used for Zeppelins, stretched over a metal framework that contained the various functional and support mechanisms. The dome was electrically controlled and could fold and unfold like a giant accordion in the space of 90 seconds and was inaugurated on 7 January 1922 with the production of Fortuny's favourite Wagnerian opera, *Parsifal*.

The lights reflected against the white cupola and enveloped the whole stage, creating an atmosphere, which must surely have fulfilled the composer's dream of uniting painting, music and drama (Osma, 1994, p.166).

In a way, Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza is also an illustrious place built on an 'ancient' but modern theatre involving Vitruvius' lesson and Palladio's invention.⁴ To get to the Teatro one must first enter the great courtyard of the Castello del Territorio that was erected at a strategic point here, during the Middle Ages, the area inside now free of constructions and laid out as a garden. Leaving Corso Palladio, the backbone of Vicenza, entering the area of the castle, here stands the Teatro Olimpico, appearing to huddle up against a section of the boundary walls of the former structure without any external signs of such a celebrated building.

Andrea Palladio designed the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza and its infrequent permanent sets at the end of his illustrious career. The project was the latest, and for Palladio the most extreme, application of the classical ideal. It marks solid and enduring arrival point in the long search for the 'modern theatre space'. Palladio suggested building an 'antique' theatre modelled on classical traditions. He proposed the layout of a Roman theatre as conjectured by Vitruvius despite the narrow dimension of the site obtained (Avagnina, 2005, p.15).

The first large room that you come to after the corridor is the one known as the hall of the Olympic Odeon, intended, as in ancient Greece, for musical recitals (Rigon, 2004, p.7)

Constructed and completed by Scamozzi, a Vicenza born architect who inherited the unfinished projects of Palladio at his death in 1580, Scamozzi took over the process of constructing the Teatro Olimpico. The theatre is still used for the celebrated "sessions", not just a work of art, but also a cultural phenomenon that still maintains its original functions: both as a centre for the activities of the Accademia Olimpica and then, importantly, a place for staging theatrical performances. In order to investigate and understand this place, the historian Fernando Rigon disputes, one must understand it in its dual and inseparable guise of both monument and theatre (Rigon, 2004, p.9)

⁴ Vitruvius, was a Roman author, architect, civil engineer and military engineer during the 1st century BC, known for his multi-volume work entitled *De architectura*. (Chisholm, ed., 1911).



Figure 2. The Olimpico Theatre in Vicenza, conceived specifically for the performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, has survived for centuries. It ideally depicts the seen roads of Thebes, the location of the tragedy, but actually shows views of contemporary Vicenza: rows of 'fine blocks of flats and palazzi projected towards a distant horizon using the perspective artifice in a rising floor and transformed by masterly control of the lights. Photo: Anna Marie Fisker.

As this article demonstrates, scenography has historically evolved from roots of the classical antiquity and notably connections to the architects of the Renaissance era - largely due to the theatrical activity in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century creating a historical interrelation between architecture and scenography. Teatro Olimpico was the first permanent covered theatre of the Renaissance, the expression not a royal court, but of the private group with cultural aims; the Accademia Olimpica.

The Accademia Olimpica had cultural and particularly scientific aims, with great interest in physics, astronomy and anatomy. These aspirations and intellectual commitments of the society are expressed in the motto *HOC OPUS HIC LABOR EST*, a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*; a metaphor for the difficulty of reaching the light of truth and knowledge by way of darkness (Avagnina, 2005, p.7).

My paper has taken the term scenography further into debate. Focusing on this historical interrelation between architecture and scenography showing the theatre as a space and place of illusion. In Teatro Olimpico, this is added by the intangible but striking element of the light, controlled by Scamozzi's expert lighting direction. The lighting units from the original stage lighting system still exist, consisting of bulbs of glass, filled for the occasion with coloured oils, or sets of wicks in metal boxes. These were placed in hidden parts of the false architecture, a network of lighting points. The sets, made of painted wood with statues formed out of plaster, soaked rags, and stucco, create subtle illusions of perspective, with rows of temples, palaces and houses lined up along the roads. These do not so much refer to an ancient city as to an "ideal" city of the Renaissance - arranged so as to suggest views of the urban surroundings of Vicenza - and in this "Conforming to the mimetic and realistic tendency of contemporary scenographic practices" (Puppi, 1973, p.435-39) (Barbieri, 1974) (Gioseffi, 1974).

Concerning Fortuny, he was from an early age ripe for the world of Wagner. His first visit to Bayreuth around 1890 was a revelation, a thunderclap that echoed through the rest of his life. Once captured by the Wagnerian vision of art, Fortuny placed all his own creative, technical and scientific resources in the service of the "master", whose art he felt had been so poorly served by the unimaginative sets, costumes and especially lightning then in use (Deschodt, 2000, p.123).

I am convinced that the modern theatre owes much to its historical and traditional connections with architecture - and lighting and sound design have been developed as a logical progression of this because technology made it possible to control and reproduce them, along with set and costume design. In fact, scenography's encounter with architecture is continually being concurred, as if it is being deferred and eked out in time, filtered by a series of preliminary spaces that are elusive in some way. Teatro Olimpico is even today an iconic stage scenario, surviving almost 500 years, and the diffused lighting system by Mariano Fortuny enabled to enhance the aura of mystery in the Wagnerian universe and became the starting point for the development of modern stage lighting.

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